



**Byers, Thomas B. What I Cannot Say; Thomas Gardner,
Discovering Ourselves in Whitman; Jeffrey Walker, Bardic Ethos
and the American Epic Poem [review]**

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When the reader flips the corners of the pages, a motion picture results, but if the reader flips too slowly, the illusion is lost. Like the single pictures in this book, each item in a Whitman catalog is fully realized, but for there to be motion, there must be speed" (47). Mason adds, "Students need to accept their impulse to skim, but they should realize that the catalogs . . . are not haphazardly constructed. The best way for students to discover Whitman's great craft is to have them write catalogs for themselves" (47). These are exciting suggestions; I hope to incorporate them next semester.

Reading aloud appeared in my students' responses to the third and fourth questions. In response to question three, five students suggested we should have more classes on Whitman, four said we should spend more time discussing Whitman's life; three urged me to read aloud even more extensively than I had. But the surprise and excitement of the exercise came in the answers to question four. There *twenty* of thirty-two students replied that the thing they had liked best about our classes on Whitman was the time I spent reading the poetry aloud to them. Aloud, aloud, aloud: the word was written on sheet after sheet, outnumbering all other answers to the question by more than two to one. Many students gave extensive reasons for their preference; these reasons were alternately aesthetic, social, thematic, and affective. For most members of the class, the oral presentation of the *Leaves* was *the* most valuable and memorable classroom experience.

Surely it is time we apply the brilliant speech act and reader response analyses of C. Carroll Hollis and others to the everyday teaching of *Leaves of Grass*. The poetry is a performance at once private and public, conversational and oratorical; it transcends the "cold types and cylinders" and "wet paper" Whitman inveighs against in the second poem of the 1855 edition. The emotional, sexual, sensory, spiritual power of the spoken word lives more perfectly and joyfully in *Leaves of Grass* than in any other post-Renaissance English-language poem. For all its usefulness, I wish *Approaches to Teaching Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass'* included an essay—or several essays—that attempted to describe in detail how teachers might create an "oral" atmosphere in their classes on Whitman, an atmosphere of sayers and hearers, speakers and listeners.

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THOMAS B. BYERS, *What I Cannot Say: Self, Word, and World in Whitman*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989. x + 147 pp.

THOMAS GARDNER, *Discovering Ourselves in Whitman: The Contemporary American Long Poem*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989. x + 208 pp.

JEFFREY WALKER, *Bardic Ethos and the American Epic Poem: Whitman, Pound, Crane, Williams, Olson*. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989. xvi + 261 pp.

Whitman addressed many audiences in addition to his contemporaries. One

"Inscriptions" poem he addressed to "Poets to Come," turning over to future bards his justification as a poet: "Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for, / But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before known, / Arouse! for you must justify me." At the end of "Song of Myself," as Whitman bade farewell to his camerado-reader, he spelled out the nature of his continuing presence even as he prepared for his enduring absence: "You will hardly know who I am or what I mean, / But I shall be good health to you nevertheless, / And filter and fibre your blood." Have America's successor poets "justified" Whitman? Does Whitman indeed "filter and fibre" the vital blood-stream of American poetry?

More and more, contemporary critical works on Whitman have devoted themselves to these or related questions. In 1988, Neeli Cherkovski in *Whitman's Wild Children* wrote about ten contemporary American poets, "each of whom, with a few exceptions, has taken on the role of bard, placing himself directly in line with Whitman": Charles Bukowski, John Wieners, James Broughton, Philip Lamantia, Bob Kaufman, Allen Ginsberg, William Everson, Gregory Corso, Harold Norse, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Although all of these poets have not become household names, Ginsberg, Everson, Corso, and Ferlinghetti will be recognized by any reader who remembers the 1950s and 1960s: they are founders and leaders of the Beat Generation, and they identified Whitman as their muse whose "open road" they wandered in search of the freedoms he championed.

It is remarkable that, in the three books under review here, all of which appeared in 1989, there is no duplication of names in the lists of poets linked by the authors to Whitman, nor is there duplication of any of the ten poets examined in *Whitman's Wild Children*. Thomas B. Byers focuses on Wallace Stevens and W. S. Merwin; Thomas Gardner on John Berryman, Galway Kinnell, Theodore Roethke, Robert Duncan, John Ashbery, and James Merrill; and Jeffrey Walker on Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Olson. If we look at the numbers, adding these twelve poets to Cherkovski's ten, we find twenty-two successor American poets, some relatively unknown but many considered of the first rank, as in some way connected with, influenced by, or reacting to their common ancestor and predecessor poet, Walt Whitman.

What are we to make of this apparent consensus that Whitman has made good his boast to "filter and fibre" the blood coursing through the veins of such dissimilar contemporary poets? Do these successor poets write to "justify" the good gray poet? It may readily be affirmed, if Messrs. Byers, Gardner, and Walker may be taken as representative contemporary scholar-critics, that Whitman has indeed "filtered" into the blood stream—or gotten under the skin—of a great many contemporary poets. But as a result they are bent more on criticizing, correcting, or completing Whitman than on justifying him. Perhaps Whitman let himself in for such a fate when he said in "Poets to Come": "I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face, / Leaving it to you prove and define it, / Expecting the main things from you."

In *What I Cannot Say: Self, Word, and World in Whitman, Stevens, and Merwin*, Thomas B. Byers sketches his method: "My critical approach is

eclectic, combining extremely close reading of crucial sections with an intertextuality influenced by both phenomenology and semiotics." Claiming the privilege of "semiotic influence" as it "broadens the notion of intertextuality," Byers explains that he has ended up with a Whitman who is "quite Emersonian," and confesses that he will therefore gloss Whitman "largely by reference to [Emerson's] essays and to commentary on them." Byers examines closely the opening sections of "Song of Myself," dwelling particularly on Sections 5 and 6, and concluding: "To the degree that Whitman believes in the transcendent word and the attainment of presence through speech, that presence is of the metaphysical, logocentric sort criticized by Heidegger and Derrida."

The Whitman that Byers imaginatively shapes in his opening chapter becomes the Whitman that, in his second chapter, he portrays Wallace Stevens (in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction") as correcting: "In the first section [of 'Notes'], 'It Must Be Abstract,' we find that the poem springs from the fact that 'pure' reality is not available to us. Whitman to the contrary, what we possess or incorporate is not the thing in *itself*, but the thing in *ourselves*, always abstracted and changed." But in spite of this major swerve from Whitman, Stevens shares with his predecessor poet, says Byers, a strongly affirmative tone evoked by his "play with language" and "the sheer pleasure of fictive invention": "These delights are characteristic of his tone, and they affirm his membership, despite all difficulties, in the Party of Hope."

This tone, of course, the somber ecological mystic W. S. Merwin does not at all share! In his third and final chapter, Byers sees Merwin's key work as *The Lice*, and the Whitman Merwin is correcting as the Whitman of Section 32 of "Song of Myself" ("I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contained, / I stand and look at them long and long"). In Byers's view, this passage and the passage following it on the "gigantic beauty of a stallion" reveal Whitman's "utilitarian view of nature as a means to self-realization" ("I but use you a minute, then I resign you, stallion"). They are, he believes, consonant with Whitman's "Song of the Redwood Tree," written (as Byers puts it) in "defense of ecological destruction," a position which "Merwin repudiates . . . at every turn" in *The Lice*.

In his conclusion, Byers places particular emphasis on what he sees as Whitman's destructive vision: "[Nature's] purpose is to serve us, and to catalogue it is in one sense to list available commodities rather than beloved others. Finally the catalogue as Orphic gathering also reifies self and voice as the center of being. . . . Voice as breath, uttering the transcendent logos, becomes the phallogocentric instrument—the magic wand—of the self's power to create the world. . . . All of these relations are underwritten by the assumption of self and other. If I *am* the world, I may dispose of it as I see fit." Byers attempts to balance this assault a few pages from the end of his book by a sudden swerve to an admirable Whitman unmentioned before, the radical democrat whose characteristic catalogues are "not of nature but of other people, and they can be read as acts of inclusion, rather than appropriation; they serve to bring before the reader some of those whom American culture and its literature had previously erased."

As this summary implies, there are many fresh insights in *What I Cannot Say*, especially in Byers's juxtaposition of Whitman and Merwin, focusing on

their attitudes toward ecology. Questions that might arise in the minds of some readers are the following: Is it appropriate for anyone who believes that poetry is first and foremost made of words to believe that the words of an essayist (Emerson) may serve as a gloss for the words of a poet (Whitman)? Critics now find Yvor Winters eccentric if not bizarre in copiously quoting Emerson to prove how Whitman had corrupted Hart Crane, leading Crane to commit suicide (see the final pages of Winters's *In Defense of Reason* [1947]).

To what extent is the claim that Whitman or Emerson believed in "the transcendent word and the attainment of presence through speech" compromised by the following passages: Whitman's dramatic reference to the ineffable "awareness" within him in Section 50 of "Song of Myself": "I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word unsaid, / It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol"? Emerson's statement in Part V of *Nature*: "Words are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it"? Whitman's explanation in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" of his poetic practice of "Suggestiveness": "I seek less to state or display any theme or thought, and more to bring you, reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or thought—there to pursue your own flight"? (See Richard Poirier's *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* [1987] for an important reexamination of Emerson's use of and attitude toward language.)

To what extent is the view that Whitman was committed to "ecological destruction"—and that his catalogues of nature were acts of appropriation—complicated by the following passages: a catalogue from the 1855 Preface: "The land and sea, the animals fishes and birds, the sky of heaven and the orbs, the forests mountains and rivers, are not small themes . . . but folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects . . . they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls"? the long catalogue of objects in nature from the ending of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," cast in the form of the imperative ("Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide"), and then followed by passionate direct address: "You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers, / . . . We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us, / We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also, / You furnish your parts toward eternity, / Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul"? (What is to be made of Whitman's friendship with the great naturalist, John Burroughs [1837-1921], and the latter's remarkable book on the poet, *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person* [1867])?

In *Bardic Ethos and the American Long Poem: Whitman, Pound, Crane, Williams, Olson*, Jeffrey Walker's Whitman differs markedly from Byers's. As Byers limited his examination of Whitman to certain special sections of "Song of Myself," Walker limits himself to the 1855 edition, an edition that was not easily available to the poets he places in the Whitman tradition at the time they were launching their long poems (they would have most likely encountered Whitman in his so-called deathbed [1891-1892] edition). Walker's Whitman is "a sort of wordsworthianism in the nude" who affirms a "vaguely defined term *democracy*," and whose ideal poet is "the elect of the elect": "In [Whitman's ideal] society the universal soul of an untrammelled humanity will take its fullest

expression, and a deviation from the attitudes of the 'best' or most-awakened sensibilities will be nothing more than a proof of one's depravity. The transcendental 'democracy' will have no place, because it can see no need, for political argumentation. . . . Whitman's ideal America will be a society with a sort of political liberty, but without any perceived use for a meaningful political dialogue." In Whitman's "national mythology," "'democracy' becomes the virtual dictatorship of a sanctified elect." Since "Whitman's rhetoric . . . was not entirely successful," it was left to successor poets to develop "a rhetoric more adequate to the ultimate goals of the sacerdotal enterprise."

Walker's chapter on Whitman, reading the 1855 edition in order to extrapolate from its "rhetoric" the ideas which might be reduced to accessible generalizations, establishes a pattern he follows for all of the successor poets he treats, demonstrating in each case the failure of this misconceived "sacerdotal enterprise." But in the process of exposing the failures, Walker provides innumerable useful and lively insights in his analyses, beginning with Ezra Pound and his *Cantos*: "If [Pound] would, like Whitman, resurrect the primitive sacerdotal literatus, he would also be Whitman-in-a-collar, adding intellect to emotion, grounding imagination in the facts of history"; "What we see in the *Cantos* . . . is a collaring of the voodoo literatus within a modernist conception of the memorious deep psyche. The result is a striking reinvention of the Whitmanesque soul duet." The problem Walker finds in Pound, especially in the progress of the first half of the *Cantos*, is the hollowness of his bardic voice: "The authorial figure veers off into a rather strident, obsessive fixity, which undermines his claim to bardic status." But from the *Pisan Cantos* on, there is a "major shift in Pound's voice" which "substantially alters the impact of the *Cantos* as a whole." This shift reaches a climax in Canto CXVI, containing the "contrite admission": "I cannot make it cohere." Walker concludes: "Pound sets out as a sort of mantic Odysseus, degenerates into an obsessive Ahab, crashes, and then floats up as a purged, chastened Ishmael. . . . The tale the *Cantos* tells the tribe is the tragedy of Ezra Pound."

Walker, like Allen Tate and Yvor Winters before him, finds the key to Hart Crane's failure in *The Bridge* in the "Cape Hatteras" section, which introduces Whitman as his own authenticating alter ego and America's "Meistersinger": "The reader is asked to believe . . . that a divine but obscure purpose redeems mechanized modernity *because Whitman said so*." Crane failed to take into account, says Walker, that most of his audience "thought of Whitman as a true poet who faithfully but too uncritically 'crystallized' the bumptious culture of shallow self-interest and ignorant posturing responsible for everything that was wrong in America Crane's Whitman thus appears, like Crane, to be holding out for a visionary hope, one the facts of history and modern actuality will not justify."

Walker finds William Carlos Williams the most nearly successful of the poets enlisted in the "sacerdotal enterprise." Although Williams, like Pound, had difficulty discovering an appropriate bardic voice, he found it ultimately and especially in Book V of *Paterson*, set largely in the room holding the unicorn tapestries in New York's museum The Cloisters. This extraordinary book ends, to the puzzlement or pleasure of readers, with a dance: "We know nothing and can know nothing / but / the dance, to dance to a measure / contrapuntally, /

Satirically, the tragic foot.” Walker concludes: “The poet speaks for an elect of understanders, amid a world that neither hears nor responds to him, and that proceeds to its inevitable disasters; as Pound said in Canto CXVI, *litterae nihil sanantes*. There is nothing to do but ‘dance,’ dance the perceptions and ardors of a tragic perspective, in *The Cloisters*.”

Unlike Williams, says Walker, Charles Olson in *The Maximus Poems* never found an authentic voice that reached beyond a devoted few: “Olson can and does assume the devoted, world-repudiating audience that the exhortations in the first volume finally require. He can and does assume, in fact, an audience almost wholly predisposed to agree and ready to regard his least utterance—fragments and jottings on the back of an envelope, for example—as important and significant, simply because he was the source. In consequence, Olson’s oracular stance veers off into the rhetoric of the memo, the word game, and the doodle. . . . In the end, Olson’s polis becomes no more than a few close friends. . . .”

For Walker’s reader, the question emerges ultimately as to why he has spent so much time, imaginative energy, and analytical skill with such long, difficult, and obscure works when they offer, according to Walker, so few rewards. It is difficult to imagine any convinced reader turning from Walker’s book to the texts he has so meticulously described as epic failures; his book, for those whom it converts, becomes a powerful excuse for turning aside from the poets he treats. The concluding chapter reinforces the theme of failure: “From Whitman to Olson, the bardic poet’s untransacted (literary) destiny remains what it always was: a splendid, quixotic, unattainable ambition.” In assessing the failure, a tone of scolding enters Walker’s voice: “It will not do, in the end, to praise the poets for what has been called their ‘epistemological honesty’. . . . It will not do, either, to excuse the poets for their failure, for their willingness to do no more than advance themselves as heroes for a literary cult, by declaring them somehow an ‘image of ourselves’. . . . [Their] failure, as we have seen, is in fact a direct consequence of the conventions with which the poet works.”

After his final wholesale rejection of the Whitman legacy as he has defined and tracked it, Walker proposes an alternative enterprise, what he calls a “nonpoetic version of the sacerdotal literatus,” exemplified at its best by Martin Luther King: “The point is King succeeded. He entered the public conscience, and did alter the direction of the national will. . . . With King, certainly, the rhetorical skill and public effectiveness of the bardic poet are brilliantly surpassed.” According to Walker, the reasons for King’s rhetorical success and the bardic poet’s failure lie in the nature of their moral appeal: “King’s ethical authority is typically grounded in sublime appeals to the constituent elements of American conscience—such as, for example, the Western (Judaean-Christian) tradition in moral philosophy, democratic ideals, and the American identification with the rights of man. . . . The bardic poet, in contrast, really has precious little ground from which to derive a source of ethical authority in the eyes of a public, non-tribal audience. His mythic history typically favors non-egalitarian, non-democratic, and non-Christian (*i.e.*, sup-

posed archaic or pagan) values, and sets the poet in implicit opposition to the codes of value that King evokes, and with which most Americans identify themselves."

Skeptical readers might well question whether something vital is overlooked in reducing poetry to rhetoric and measuring its success by its effect in changing the world. And they might also wonder at Walker's limiting himself, without reasonable justification, so severely to Whitman's 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. But even that edition contained the first version of "Song of Myself," opening: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." Is this voice that of someone who would identify "democracy" as "the virtual dictatorship of a sanctified elect"? Certainly those who read Byers *What I Cannot Say* alongside Walker's book are bound to wonder that Byers ends by praising the very elements in Whitman—his egalitarian, democratic, libertarian, and other radical themes—that Walker has been unable to find. A poem in the 1855 edition of *Leaves* that Walker curiously does not mention reaches out in one of its radically egalitarian catalogues to include a multitude of the "unsanctified," accepting and including them all: "The homeward bound and the outward bound, / The beautiful lost swimmer, the ennuyé, the onanist, the female that loves unrequited, the money-maker, . . . / The stammerer, the sick, the perfect-form'd, the homely, / The criminal that stood in the box, the judge that sat and sentenced him, the fluent lawyers, the jury, the audience, / The laughter and the weeper, the dancer, the midnight widow, the red squaw, / The consumptive, the erysipalite, the idiot, he that is wrong'd, / The antipodes, and every one between this and them in the dark, / I swear they are averaged now—one is no better than the other, / The night and sleep have lik'en'd them and restored them." It is unfortunate that Walker was apparently unable to make use of Betsy Erkkila's invaluable *Whitman the Political Poet* (1989); her book provides an excellent corrective to Walker's distortions of Whitman's democratic beliefs.

Thomas Gardner, in *Discovering Ourselves in Whitman: The Contemporary American Long Poem*, attempts less but perhaps achieves more than the other two books under review here. His point of departure from Whitman is Section 50 of "Song of Myself," in which the poet cannot find language in "any dictionary, utterance, symbol" to express the knowing that is in him: "Something it swings on more than the earth I swing on, / To it the creation is the friend whose embracing awakes me." The key word that will recur in Gardner's book is "embrace": "Proposing to name what is unknown ('I do not know what it is'), asleep ('I sleep long'), or 'unsaid' in his inner world by 'embracing' the world external to him (the 'creation'), Whitman also carefully acknowledges the limitations of his project: he will, through such a procedure, offer 'Outlines,' not that world itself." In short, Gardner says, Whitman defines the path to the world of inner knowing as lying through the outer, physical earth: the embrace of a friend will awaken that which is lodged unsaid and unsayable within.

It is of some interest here that Gardner finds one of his prime examples of the kind of external "embrace" central to Whitman's poetic strategy the identification with animals in Section 32—that same section that Byers cited as an example of Whitman's utilitarian use of nature that leads to his commitment to

“ecological destruction”: “Section 32, where Whitman looks ‘long and long’ at animals, models the sort of embrace needed. . . . Animals ‘show their relations to me and I accept them,’ Whitman writes. ‘They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their possession’. . . . Acting out such an involvement, Whitman describes himself ‘picking out’ a particular stallion he loves, embracing it with his heels, and riding it. He concludes, pointing to limits placed now on such an embrace: ‘I but use you a minute, then I resign you, stallion, / Why do I need your paces when I myself out-gallop them?’ . . . The long catalog of section 33 is, of course, the fullest example the poem provides of such an embrace. . . .” Gardner’s identification of the catalogue here as an extended example of “embracing” is a far cry from Byers’s characterization of the purpose of the Whitman’s catalogues “to list available commodities.”

Gardner carefully differentiates among the successor poets he links with Whitman through their adoption of his strategy of “embracing.” First come John Berryman and Galway Kinnell: “Berryman’s *Dream Songs* are structured as an attempt to tease out and confront the personal difficulties that stand as blinds between him and the world, while Kinnell’s *Book of Nightmares* can be seen to be progressively working through his fear of death—a fear that at first holds him away from the world, but eventually, when understood, draws him toward it.” Next come Theodore Roethke and Robert Duncan: “The second set of writers . . . more usefully understand the limited nature of the embrace as issuing not from a resolvable personal problem, but from the act of using a medium itself. Thus, Roethke’s attempt in ‘North American Sequence’ to make his spirit visible by embracing the currents where a river enters the sea, when acknowledged as impossible to accomplish directly, becomes a study in indirection. . . . Likewise, Robert Duncan, in his self-portrait ‘Passages,’ reads himself through the boundless sea of humanity’s made things.” And, finally come John Ashbery and James Merrill: “[They] are engaged, in ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’ and *The Changing Light at Sandover*, in singing the self through working with something external.” According to Gardner, Ashbery and Merrill “make Whitman’s embrace primarily a language issue: language being an external medium that both invites and ultimately discourages a full embrace: language being a medium that, when read as not providing full contact, can be wonderfully and imaginatively worked with.”

At times the poetic strategy of “embracing,” as Gardner has derived it from Whitman and explored it in six important contemporary long poems, tends to shift and blur in its meaning, but it provides a fruitful framework for Gardner to offer his keen and provocative insights into a number of intricately constructed poems. He would not claim that he has offered us the last word on these poems, but he may rightfully claim that he has found a way of seeing important relationships among them, and equally important relationships between the way they and Whitman’s *Leaves* came into being.

A passage from the opening of the chapter on Ashbery, who at first glance seems so unlike Whitman, may serve as an example of Gardner’s tactic in confronting the difficulties posed by the poems he has chosen: “Oddly, although perhaps the farthest from Whitman in terms of the texture of his verse, Ashbery, of all the poets in this book, comes closest to capturing the ‘amused,

complacent' tone of Whitman's response to this tension [between the mystical self and the common language in which the self must be embodied]:

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,
Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,
Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.

Guided by Ashbery's exploration of the same subject in 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,' this chapter will examine the act of evaluation that must, at some level, have made possible both writers' ready acceptance of this gap between self and portrait, between 'the real I' and its 'pulling and hauling' medium." The insight offered here, connecting Ashbery and Whitman, derives not from mundane "facts" but from a lively imagination and poetic sensibility and seems to me entirely persuasive. It is, I intuit, a sensibility that would be reluctant to reduce poetry to rhetoric and resistant to equate it with paraphrasable ideas generalized into philosophical positions.

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